

Downton Abbey: Further education



Airing this Autumn on NRK

An anecdote about a school essay written by Alan Clark, later conservative politician, tells of how he wrote to inform the world of the sufferings of the upper classes. The young Clark dwelt on a family in dire circumstances: ‘He grew up poor. His father was poor, his mother was poor, his sister was poor and his butler was poor.’

Norwegians are clearly attracted to the life and times of the English upper classes. And this fascination inevitably includes an interest in stately homes and servants, not least as portrayed on film and TV. Think of ‘Upstairs and Downstairs’, ‘Brideshead Revisited’, ‘The Remains of the Day’, ‘Gosford Park’ and last but not least, ‘Downton Abbey’, the BBC series that traces the changing times in English class relations in early 20th century. We follow the fates of an aristocratic family and their staff as British society moves towards a more egalitarian society, both in terms of class and gender. What does the immense popularity of ‘Downton Abbey’ say about British history and social relations?

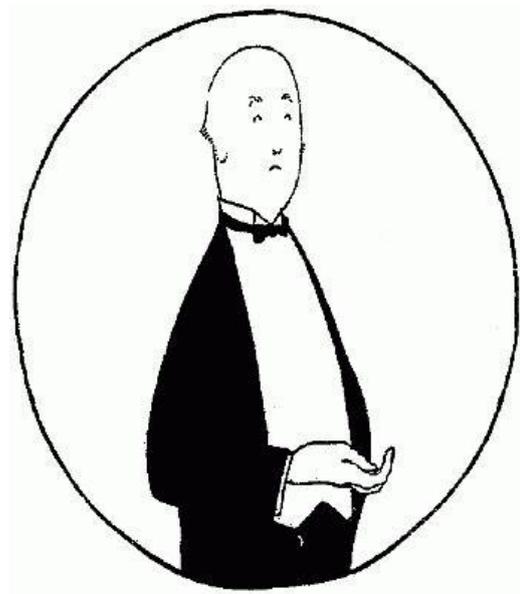
The series has won numerous awards and much acclaim, but ‘Downton Abbey’ is not without its critics. The historian [Simon Schama](#), who gladly acted the role of party pooper during the most recent part of the series, called it ‘cultural necrophilia’, an unhealthy attraction to corpses. Instead

of teaching the viewer about the complexity of history, he argued, the show nurtured a nostalgic and unrealistic view of the past. The veil of nostalgia not only covers the lord and his family, but also the immaculate butler and the maid with her bonnet. As such, the series assumes the existence of a golden age - one which unhappily seems to have ended as society became more democratic.

History from Below

To what extent this was in fact a golden age depends on which side of the golden age you belonged to, however. This much Lucy Lethbridge makes clear in a book about the history of British servanthood: [*Servants. A Downstairs View of Twentieth-century Britain*](#). While her focus is on the people down below, Lethbridge necessarily also documents the excesses of the upper classes. 'Don't you think George that a few sheep, with lambs gambolling about, would make the fields look furnished?', a duchess is supposed to have asked her butler. The next morning both sheep and lambs were in place, the butler later remembered. Such stories of out-of-touch upper-class Brits abound.

So what about the history of servanthood? What really happened to the butler and the maid? In 1765 a British judge declared that the relationship between lord and servant was the first of the three 'great relations of private life', in addition to those of man and wife and parents and children. As late as 1911 around 800 000 British families kept servants, and a fifth of these had more than three. The institution of servanthood had, it should be noted, a more than mildly gendered profile. The number of male servants was drastically reduced in the second half of the nineteenth century and by 1901 there were approximately 1,3 million women servants within doors in Britain, against just 47 000 male ones.



Servants were many things. From 'the footman' who was primarily there for decorative purposes to 'the-maid-of-all-work' who in an average week carried three tons of water up and down the stairs. And the specifications from above were of many different kinds. Some servants were suitable for opening doors. Others, such as the squint-eyed ones, were placed safely out of sight. The Duke of Bedford seems to have had particularly high standards. None of his 'parlourmaids' were to be shorter than five foot ten.

Having servants was not at all just an upper-class phenomenon. The growing middle class also had them. The presence of servants appealed to the British middle-class ideal of 'the ordered life'. But it was also about the orderliness of society. If the social pyramid was to retain its proper shape, the humble servant was as necessary as the lord of the manor. Mrs Beeton's classical *Book*

of Household Management (first published in 1861) compared the middle-class housewife to ‘the commander of an army’.

If you kept servants, there was plenty of support to be found in a specific genre of self-help literature.

In a book with an enduringly relevant title, *Appearances: How to Keep Them up on a Limited Income*, Mrs Alfred Praga shared her experiences as a lawyer’s wife on a moderate budget: ‘So much depends on the constant cooperation of well-trained servants. Without it, the best bred of hostesses is placed at a disadvantage’. The ideal was to train up ‘low-voiced’ and ‘softly footed’ creatures. ‘Servants like birds must be caught when young’, it was claimed. At the beginning of the 20th century, the average age for entering domestic service was 14.

Changing Times

World events disturb the harmony in ‘Downton Abbey’. In real life, too, class relations shifted as history progressed. The two world wars, and particularly the last one, must claim much of the responsibility for the fall of the old regime of servanthood. One factor was the new demand for women in industry. Soon more self-conscious working-class girls began to prefer the factory to a life of nods and subservience. The gradual decline of the servant class coincided with the twilight years of the great estates, with a new view of women’s role and class relations, in addition to the development of new technology. Back in the late nineteenth-century Leslie Stephen, father of the author Virginia Woolf, wondered why on earth he should install a hot water system in his London home; it was so much easier to have two or three maids carry the water for bathing and washing up and down the stairs. But gradually it became more difficult to argue this case.

All up until his death in 1940, the Duke of Bedford kept 60 domestic servants in Woburn Abbey, just to take care of himself and his lady. But after World War II most things seem to have changed. ‘What the devil does one write about these days’, a frustrated P.G. Wodehouse asked a friend in 1945, ‘if one is a specialist in country houses and butlers, both of which have ceased to exist?’ This did not mean that Wodehouse stopped writing about Jeeves and Wooster, or that there weren’t still those who lived in parallel universes.

As British class relations shifted, historians, such as Lethbridge, started writing history from below. In Lethbridge’s book the softly footed, those who were neither to be seen nor heard, finally have a say. The voices of the servants reach us through diaries, letters, interviews, reports, novels and in the investigative journalism of middle-class women who went undercover in order to find out what things were really like (as if they were anthropologists on their way to Papua New Guinea).

The New Servant Class

Servants is the history of the rise and fall of servanthood, but at the very end Lethbridge describes a new turn. The amount spent on domestic service by the average British household quadrupled

in real terms between 1978 and 2011, she notes. But these days you import your cleaning lady, and she rarely lives in your home. Estimates suggest that there are as many domestics in London today as there were in nineteenth century, even if we haven't quite reached Edwardian heights – or depths.

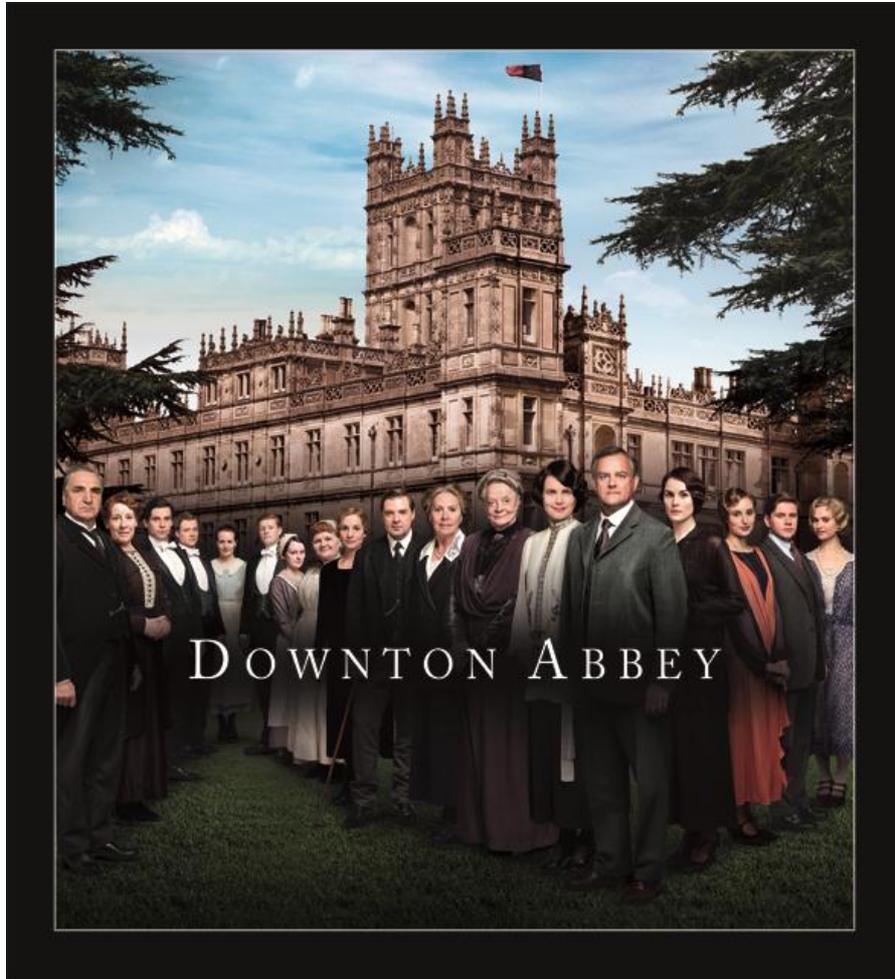
In part this phenomenon is related to what another recent book, Ferdinand Mount's *The New Few* (2012), described as a new class of the super-rich, completely detached from the rest of society. But it is equally about the 'the new many', a European middle class which in a more globalized workplace have a chance of realizing their dreams of having more time and less of a mess. In this particular way there may perhaps also be something of 'Downton Abbey' about Vinderen. During the last decade the number of au pairs in Norway is supposed to have quadrupled, according to NRK's investigative program 'Brennpunkt'.

The current trend has a rich prehistory. The very symbol of the fictional 1930s middle-class housewife, Mrs Miniver, famous both through a novel and a film, was of the opinion that housework ought to be like a 'low distant humming in the background'. It was only thus that she, not to mention her husband, would be able to concentrate on their own fascinating and complex inner lives.

The somewhat out of touch upper-class politician Alan Clark had a motto: 'Only servants apologize'. Maybe it is appropriate, then, that Lethbridge apologizes on behalf of those upstairs, if ever so indirectly, by giving those downstairs their voices back.

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Working with the text:



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Content, language and genre

Tore Rem's text is not a news report, but a commentary. These two genres have different functions and raise different questions. A *news report* focuses on covering the basic facts of the event: What happened? Who did it? When did it happen? How many were involved? How much did it cost? A news report on the popularity of *Downton Abbey*, then, would focus on issues such as ratings, award nominations and maybe compare it with competing TV series. The writer is not supposed to argue a case or make his or her opinion known, but to report the events in a neutral manner.

A *commentary* tries to dig deeper. Instead of reporting the news, it takes a recent event as a starting point to discuss wider historical, political, and social issues. Questions commonly addressed in commentaries include: What caused the change? How is this significant today? What is the origin of the phenomenon? The writer may give his or her opinion on the matter.

1. Read Rem's commentary carefully and answer the following questions:
 - a) What recent trend is the starting point of Rem's text?
 - b) Identify the main question he raises. What does he want to explore?
 - c) What does he reveal about his own opinions on class in Britain and Norway today?

2. The author uses irony and satire, two related literary devices, in this text. According to the [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](#), *irony* can either be:
 - a) "the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really think especially in order to be funny", or
 - b) "a situation that is strange or funny because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you expected."

The dictionary defines *satire* as:

- a) "a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn", or
- b) "trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly"

Identify uses of irony and satire in Rem's text. What type of irony appears there? What does it add to the text? Where does he use satire?

3. Rem starts his text with a teaser that recounts an anecdote about a conservative politician. An *anecdote* is a short and humorous, more or less true, story about a real person that is meant to catch the interest of the audience and introduce the broader themes the author/speaker will address. What does the anecdote add to Rem's text?

As you answer the question, consider the following:

- a) What is meant to be funny about the anecdote? Do you think it is funny? Why? Why not?
- b) Why do you think Rem included the anecdote? What did he try to say by including it?
- c) What does the anecdote tell you (whether it is true or not) about the British upper class?
- d) How does the anecdote introduce broader themes in the commentary?
- e) Does it make you more interested in reading the text? Why? Why not?

History and fiction

The TV series *Downton Abbey* is a piece of historical fiction. Characters like Lord Grantham, Mr. Bates, and Anna are not real people. There is no real estate called Downton Abbey. But Yorkshire is a very real part of England. And real history enters in and shapes the storyline. For instance, the very first episode had the Titanic disaster as a backdrop. Other episodes dealt with the suffragette movement (the fight for women's right to vote) and the First World War. Historical fiction, whether TV-series, movies, or literature, is therefore not completely removed from real history.

Historical fiction differs from films, literature, and TV series *based on true stories*. A film like the recent *Lincoln*, for instance, was based on a true story, namely that of president Abraham Lincoln political battles in the 1860s. The Norwegian *Kon-Tiki* film narrates the story of Thor Heyerdahl and his crew on the raft across the Pacific Ocean. The term *based on*, however, signals that there is room for adapting the stories to write a good plot.

History as presented on TV, in literature, and on the big screen, then, is a complicated

matter. Nevertheless, historic fiction can often work as a starting point to better understand history and the present. Rem's commentary is an example of how one may discuss the past and the present in response to art.

4. Discussing the relationship between fiction and history, Rem refers to Simon Schama's critique of *Downton Abbey*.

- a) How does Schama explain the popularity of *Downton Abbey*?
- b) What does Schama think about people's knowledge of the past?

5. Rem argues that, 'To what extent this was in fact a golden age depends on which side of the golden age you belonged to...'

- a) What do you think he means by this statement?
- b) How does he support it?

6. What does he say about how class matters in British society today?

7. How does he explain the decline in the number of servants in Britain in the 20th century?

Writing

8. What does Rem say about class in Norway today? Do you agree with him? Why? Why not? Do you partly agree? Write three paragraphs of 3-5 sentences where you support your argument. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence.

Vocabulary

9. Go to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (<http://www.britannica.com>) and/or *Oxford Dictionaries* (<http://oxforddictionaries.com>) and search for these terms:

- aristocracy
- butler
- middle class
- egalitarian
- gender
- appearance
- anthropologist

Choose 3 of the terms above to paraphrase. Then:

- a) Read the definitions carefully.
- b) Write 5-10 keywords about each term.
- c) Use your own words to define the terms.